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Book: US misled public on KAL

Tapes said to show Soviet confusion

By Fred Kaplan
Globe Staff

WASHINGTON - US officials knowingly misled the public after the Soviets shot down Korean Air Lines Flight 007 three years ago, and waged a worldwide campaign against Soviet "barbarism" even though they knew the Soviet officers who ordered the attack did not know they were firing on a commercial airliner, according to a new book on the subject.

The book, "The Target Is Destroyed" by Seymour M. Hersh, a prize-winning New York Times investigative reporter, concludes that KAL 007 was not on a spy mission, contrary to Soviet statements and articles by some Western writers. However, Hersh also concludes that the Soviets believed the airliner was a spy plane.

Hersh also describes in greater detail than previously published what goes on inside the overseas listening posts of the National Security Agency.

Most of the material in the book appears to come from interviews with NSA officials, many of whom, Hersh says, have never before talked with reporters. He says that some of them agreed to be interviewed because they were outraged at how the Reagan Administration misused sensitive intelligence data for political purposes.

The book also relies on classified documents, including the official NSA "after-action" report on the KAL attack. Hersh also interviewed high-level White House and State Department officials, who gave him new information on how the administration formulated its policy following the downing of the jetliner.

An NSA spokesman said yesterday he could not comment on anything mentioned in the book.

Hersh reports that:

- A colonel monitoring Soviet communications at an NSA compound heard a Soviet pilot say he was firing a missile and that the target was destroyed, but the NSA officer had no way of knowing what was being shot or of relaying word to US officials.

This was because the analyst was working at an NSA compound at Wakkani, Japan, known as Project CLEF, a place so secretive that neither the highest Japanese officials nor much of the US government knew of its existence. The officials called other NSA officers, at Misawa, Japan, over an open telephone line to tell them about the attack, and a plane was sent to Wakkani to pick up the tape.

- Officers at Misawa sent NSA headquarters a "CRITIC" message, the highest alert message, which is supposed to be put in the hands of the president within 10 minutes, but the message was rescinded by headquarters, as was a second CRITIC cable sent an hour later.

- After it became clear a Soviet plane had shot down the Korean flight, a US Air Force commander in the Pacific, without the knowledge of anyone in Washington, assigned six Air Force F-15 jets and an AWACS surveillance plane to Misawa and ordered them to try to provoke an incident near Soviet territory. He also asked an officer in the Pacific to forward a fraudulent intelligence report to the Pentagon designed to justify provocative acts against the Soviet Union. Hersh writes the officer reportedly told the commander "to go to hell."

- Contrary to administration assertions after the attack, a Boeing 747 - the type of plane used by KAL - is not easy to distinguish at night from an RC-135 spy plane, which is a modified Boeing 707. One US tanker pilot told Hersh he once flew 500 yards from a Japan Air Line 747 before realizing the plane was not the RC-135 he was supposed to refuel.

- Secretary of State George Shultz rushed to declare at a press conference the morning after the incident that the Soviet pilot saw KAL 007 was a civilian airliner, even though NSA analysts warned that their intelligence was still raw and not fully translated or analyzed. Shultz did so at the urging of Lawrence Eagleburger, the deputy secretary of state, and Richard Burt, the assistant secretary, who saw it as a golden opportunity for Shultz to improve his standing among White House hardliners.

Officers at NSA listening posts who watched Shultz on television were "appalled" by his statement, as were Japanese officials, including Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone.

- An analysis by Air Force Intelligence, within a day of the attack, concluded the Soviets shot down the Korean airliner not in cold blood but by mistake. This analysis, however, was not seen by administration officials until after Shultz gave his press conference. When President Reagan endorsed Shultz' claim the next day, he had received no intelligence briefings at all.

The day after the attack, a Soviet pilot involved in the downing was overheard by a US satellite as calling the aircraft as an RC-135, giving the Air Force analysis further credibility.

By the end of the first week, as everyone discovered that an RC-135 had flown in the area earlier that evening, the Air Force analysis was accepted throughout the government. Administration officials, however, made no effort to straighten the record or adjust their rhetoric. A member of Vice President George Bush's special crisis group said the attitude was, "Why find reasons to excuse the Soviets?"

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